

Chapter LX

The Dangers thicken, and the Worst is told

Instead of going home, Ralph threw himself into the first street cabriolet he could find, and, directing the driver towards the police-office of the district in which Mr Squeers's misfortunes had occurred, alighted at a short distance from it, and, discharging the man, went the rest of his way thither on foot. Inquiring for the object of his solicitude, he learnt that he had timed his visit well; for Mr Squeers was, in fact, at that moment waiting for a hackney coach he had ordered, and in which he purposed proceeding to his week's retirement, like a gentleman.

Demanding speech with the prisoner, he was ushered into a kind of waiting-room in which, by reason of his scholastic profession and superior respectability, Mr Squeers had been permitted to pass the day. Here, by the light of a guttering and blackened candle, he could barely discern the schoolmaster, fast asleep on a bench in a remote corner. An empty glass stood on a table before him, which, with his somnolent condition and a very strong smell of brandy and water, forewarned the visitor that Mr Squeers had been seeking, in creature comforts, a temporary forgetfulness of his unpleasant situation.

It was not a very easy matter to rouse him: so lethargic and heavy were his slumbers. Regaining his faculties by slow and faint glimmerings, he at length sat upright; and, displaying a very yellow face, a very red nose, and a very bristly beard: the joint effect of which was considerably heightened by a dirty white handkerchief, spotted with blood, drawn over the crown of his head and tied under his chin: stared ruefully at Ralph in silence, until his feelings found a vent in this pithy sentence:

'I say, young fellow, you've been and done it now; you have!'

'What's the matter with your head?' asked Ralph.

'Why, your man, your informing kidnapping man, has been and broke it,' rejoined Squeers sulkily; 'that's what's the matter with it. You've come at last, have you?'

'Why have you not sent to me?' said Ralph. 'How could I come till I knew what had befallen you?'

'My family!' hiccuped Mr Squeers, raising his eye to the ceiling: 'my daughter, as is at that age when all the sensibilities is a-coming out strong in blow - my son as is the young Norval of private life, and the pride and ornament of a doting willage - here's a shock for my family!'

The coat-of-arms of the Squeerses is tore, and their sun is gone down into the ocean wave!

'You have been drinking,' said Ralph, 'and have not yet slept yourself sober.'

'I haven't been drinking YOUR health, my codger,' replied Mr Squeers; 'so you have nothing to do with that.'

Ralph suppressed the indignation which the schoolmaster's altered and insolent manner awakened, and asked again why he had not sent to him.

'What should I get by sending to you?' returned Squeers. 'To be known to be in with you wouldn't do me a deal of good, and they won't take bail till they know something more of the case, so here am I hard and fast: and there are you, loose and comfortable.'

'And so must you be in a few days,' retorted Ralph, with affected good-humour. 'They can't hurt you, man.'

'Why, I suppose they can't do much to me, if I explain how it was that I got into the good company of that there ca-daverous old Slider,' replied Squeers viciously, 'who I wish was dead and buried, and resurrected and dissected, and hung upon wires in a anatomical museum, before ever I'd had anything to do with her. This is what him with the powdered head says this morning, in so many words: 'Prisoner! As you have been found in company with this woman; as you were detected in possession of this document; as you were engaged with her in fraudulently destroying others, and can give no satisfactory account of yourself; I shall remand you for a week, in order that inquiries may be made, and evidence got. And meanwhile I can't take any bail for your appearance.' Well then, what I say now is, that I CAN give a satisfactory account of myself; I can hand in the card of my establishment and say, 'I am the Wackford Squeers as is therein named, sir. I am the man as is guaranteed, by unimpeachable references, to be a out-and-outer in morals and uprightness of principle. Whatever is wrong in this business is no fault of mine. I had no evil design in it, sir. I was not aware that anything was wrong. I was merely employed by a friend, my friend Mr Ralph Nickleby, of Golden Square. Send for him, sir, and ask him what he has to say; he's the man; not me!''

'What document was it that you had?' asked Ralph, evading, for the moment, the point just raised.

'What document? Why, THE document,' replied Squeers. 'The Madeline What's-her-name one. It was a will; that's what it was.'

'Of what nature, whose will, when dated, how benefiting her, to what extent?' asked Ralph hurriedly.

'A will in her favour; that's all I know,' rejoined Squeers, 'and that's more than you'd have known, if you'd had them bellows on your head. It's all owing to your precious caution that they got hold of it. If you had let me burn it, and taken my word that it was gone, it would have been a heap of ashes behind the fire, instead of being whole and sound, inside of my great-coat.'

'Beaten at every point!' muttered Ralph.

'Ah!' sighed Squeers, who, between the brandy and water and his broken head, wandered strangely, 'at the delightful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry - this is a altered state of trigonomics, this is! A double 1 - all, everything - a cobbler's weapon. U-p-up, adjective, not down. S-q-u-double e-r-s-Squeers, noun substantive, a educator of youth. Total, all up with Squeers!'

His running on, in this way, had afforded Ralph an opportunity of recovering his presence of mind, which at once suggested to him the necessity of removing, as far as possible, the schoolmaster's misgivings, and leading him to believe that his safety and best policy lay in the preservation of a rigid silence.

'I tell you, once again,' he said, 'they can't hurt you. You shall have an action for false imprisonment, and make a profit of this, yet. We will devise a story for you that should carry you through twenty times such a trivial scrape as this; and if they want security in a thousand pounds for your reappearance in case you should be called upon, you shall have it. All you have to do is, to keep back the truth. You're a little fuddled tonight, and may not be able to see this as clearly as you would at another time; but this is what you must do, and you'll need all your senses about you; for a slip might be awkward.'

'Oh!' said Squeers, who had looked cunningly at him, with his head stuck on one side, like an old raven. 'That's what I'm to do, is it? Now then, just you hear a word or two from me. I an't a-going to have any stories made for me, and I an't a-going to stick to any. If I find matters going again me, I shall expect you to take your share, and I'll take care you do. You never said anything about danger. I never bargained for being brought into such a plight as this, and I don't mean to take it as quiet as you think. I let you lead me on, from one thing to another, because we had been mixed up together in a certain sort of a way, and

if you had liked to be ill-natured you might perhaps have hurt the business, and if you liked to be good-natured you might throw a good deal in my way. Well; if all goes right now, that's quite correct, and I don't mind it; but if anything goes wrong, then times are altered, and I shall just say and do whatever I think may serve me most, and take advice from nobody. My moral influence with them lads,' added Mr Squeers, with deeper gravity, 'is a tottering to its basis. The images of Mrs Squeers, my daughter, and my son Wackford, all short of vittles, is perpetually before me; every other consideration melts away and vanishes, in front of these; the only number in all arithmetic that I know of, as a husband and a father, is number one, under this here most fatal go!'

How long Mr Squeers might have declaimed, or how stormy a discussion his declamation might have led to, nobody knows. Being interrupted, at this point, by the arrival of the coach and an attendant who was to bear him company, he perched his hat with great dignity on the top of the handkerchief that bound his head; and, thrusting one hand in his pocket, and taking the attendant's arm with the other, suffered himself to be led forth.

'As I supposed from his not sending!' thought Ralph. 'This fellow, I plainly see through all his tipsy fooling, has made up his mind to turn upon me. I am so beset and hemmed in, that they are not only all struck with fear, but, like the beasts in the fable, have their fling at me now, though time was, and no longer ago than yesterday too, when they were all civility and compliance. But they shall not move me. I'll not give way. I will not budge one inch!'

He went home, and was glad to find his housekeeper complaining of illness, that he might have an excuse for being alone and sending her away to where she lived: which was hard by. Then, he sat down by the light of a single candle, and began to think, for the first time, on all that had taken place that day.

He had neither eaten nor drunk since last night, and, in addition to the anxiety of mind he had undergone, had been travelling about, from place to place almost incessantly, for many hours. He felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing save a glass of water, and continued to sit with his head upon his hand; not resting nor thinking, but laboriously trying to do both, and feeling that every sense but one of weariness and desolation, was for the time benumbed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, and still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It had been often repeated, and he had, several times, heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window

(meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go downstairs.

'Mr Nickleby, there is terrible news for you, and I am sent to beg you will come with me directly,' said a voice he seemed to recognise. He held his hand above his eyes, and, looking out, saw Tim Linkinwater on the steps.

'Come where?' demanded Ralph.

'To our house, where you came this morning. I have a coach here.'

'Why should I go there?' said Ralph.

'Don't ask me why, but pray come with me.'

'Another edition of today!' returned Ralph, making as though he would shut the door.

'No, no!' cried Tim, catching him by the arm and speaking most earnestly; 'it is only that you may hear something that has occurred: something very dreadful, Mr Nickleby, which concerns you nearly. Do you think I would tell you so or come to you like this, if it were not the case?'

Ralph looked at him more closely. Seeing that he was indeed greatly excited, he faltered, and could not tell what to say or think.

'You had better hear this now, than at any other time,' said Tim; 'it may have some influence with you. For Heaven's sake come!'

Perhaps, at, another time, Ralph's obstinacy and dislike would have been proof against any appeal from such a quarter, however emphatically urged; but now, after a moment's hesitation, he went into the hall for his hat, and returning, got into the coach without speaking a word.

Tim well remembered afterwards, and often said, that as Ralph Nickleby went into the house for this purpose, he saw him, by the light of the candle which he had set down upon a chair, reel and stagger like a drunken man. He well remembered, too, that when he had placed his foot upon the coach-steps, he turned round and looked upon him with a face so ashy pale and so very wild and vacant that it made him shudder, and for the moment almost afraid to follow. People were fond of saying that he had some dark presentiment upon him then, but his emotion might, perhaps, with greater show of reason, be referred to what he had undergone that day.

A profound silence was observed during the ride. Arrived at their place of destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house, and into a room where the two brothers were. He was so astounded, not to say awed, by something of a mute compassion for himself which was visible in their manner and in that of the old clerk, that he could scarcely speak.

Having taken a seat, however, he contrived to say, though in broken words, 'What - what have you to say to me - more than has been said already?'

The room was old and large, very imperfectly lighted, and terminated in a bay window, about which hung some heavy drapery. Casting his eyes in this direction as he spoke, he thought he made out the dusky figure of a man. He was confirmed in this impression by seeing that the object moved, as if uneasy under his scrutiny.

'Who's that yonder?' he said.

'One who has conveyed to us, within these two hours, the intelligence which caused our sending to you,' replied brother Charles. 'Let him be, sir, let him be for the present.'

'More riddles!' said Ralph, faintly. 'Well, sir?'

In turning his face towards the brothers he was obliged to avert it from the window; but, before either of them could speak, he had looked round again. It was evident that he was rendered restless and uncomfortable by the presence of the unseen person; for he repeated this action several times, and at length, as if in a nervous state which rendered him positively unable to turn away from the place, sat so as to have it opposite him, muttering as an excuse that he could not bear the light.

The brothers conferred apart for a short time: their manner showing that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them twice or thrice, and ultimately said, with a great effort to recover his self-possession, 'Now, what is this? If I am brought from home at this time of night, let it be for something. What have you got to tell me?' After a short pause, he added, 'Is my niece dead?'

He had struck upon a key which rendered the task of commencement an easier one. Brother Charles turned, and said that it was a death of which they had to tell him, but that his niece was well.

'You don't mean to tell me,' said Ralph, as his eyes brightened, 'that her brother's dead? No, that's too good. I'd not believe it, if you told me so. It would be too welcome news to be true.'

'Shame on you, you hardened and unnatural man,' cried the other brother, warmly. 'Prepare yourself for intelligence which, if you have any human feeling in your breast, will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor unfortunate boy: a child in everything but never having known one of those tender endearments, or one of those lightsome hours which make our childhood a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our after life: a warm-hearted, harmless, affectionate creature, who never offended you, or did you wrong, but on whom you have vented the malice and hatred you have conceived for your nephew, and whom you have made an instrument for wreaking your bad passions upon him: what if we tell you that, sinking under your persecution, sir, and the misery and ill-usage of a life short in years but long in suffering, this poor creature has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it, you must surely answer?'

'If you tell me,' said Ralph; 'if you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else. If you tell me that he is dead, I am in your debt and bound to you for life. He is! I see it in your faces. Who triumphs now? Is this your dreadful news; this your terrible intelligence? You see how it moves me. You did well to send. I would have travelled a hundred miles afoot, through mud, mire, and darkness, to hear this news just at this time.'

Even then, moved as he was by this savage joy, Ralph could see in the faces of the two brothers, mingling with their look of disgust and horror, something of that indefinable compassion for himself which he had noticed before.

'And HE brought you the intelligence, did he?' said Ralph, pointing with his finger towards the recess already mentioned; 'and sat there, no doubt, to see me prostrated and overwhelmed by it! Ha, ha, ha! But I tell him that I'll be a sharp thorn in his side for many a long day to come; and I tell you two, again, that you don't know him yet; and that you'll rue the day you took compassion on the vagabond.'

'You take me for your nephew,' said a hollow voice; 'it would be better for you, and for me too, if I were he indeed.'

The figure that he had seen so dimly, rose, and came slowly down. He started back, for he found that he confronted - not Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason, that he knew, to fear this man; he had never feared him before; but the pallor which had been observed in his face when he issued forth that night, came upon him again. He was seen to tremble, and his voice changed as he said, keeping his eyes upon him,

'What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict, a felon, a common thief?'

'Hear what he has to tell you. Oh, Mr Nickleby, hear what he has to tell you, be he what he may!' cried the brothers, with such emphatic earnestness, that Ralph turned to them in wonder. They pointed to Brooker. Ralph again gazed at him: as it seemed mechanically.

'That boy,' said the man, 'that these gentlemen have been talking of - '

'That boy,' repeated Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

'Whom I saw, stretched dead and cold upon his bed, and who is now in his grave - '

'Who is now in his grave,' echoed Ralph, like one who talks in his sleep.

The man raised his eyes, and clasped his hands solemnly together:

' - Was your only son, so help me God in heaven!'

In the midst of a dead silence, Ralph sat down, pressing his two hands upon his temples. He removed them, after a minute, and never was there seen, part of a living man undisfigured by any wound, such a ghastly face as he then disclosed. He looked at Brooker, who was by this time standing at a short distance from him; but did not say one word, or make the slightest sound or gesture.

'Gentlemen,' said the man, 'I offer no excuses for myself. I am long past that. If, in telling you how this has happened, I tell you that I was harshly used, and perhaps driven out of my real nature, I do it only as a necessary part of my story, and not to shield myself. I am a guilty man.'

He stopped, as if to recollect, and looking away from Ralph, and addressing himself to the brothers, proceeded in a subdued and humble tone:

'Among those who once had dealings with this man, gentlemen - that's from twenty to five-and-twenty years ago - there was one: a rough fox-hunting, hard-drinking gentleman, who had run through his own fortune, and wanted to squander away that of his sister: they were both orphans, and she lived with him and managed his house. I don't know whether it was, originally, to back his influence and try to over-persuade the young woman or not, but he,' pointing, to Ralph, 'used to go down to the house in Leicestershire pretty often, and stop there many days at a time. They had had a great many dealings together,

and he may have gone on some of those, or to patch up his client's affairs, which were in a ruinous state; of course he went for profit. The gentlewoman was not a girl, but she was, I have heard say, handsome, and entitled to a pretty large property. In course of time, he married her. The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept strictly private; for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister didn't buy, and pay for handsomely; Mr Nickleby would consent to no such sacrifice; and so they went on, keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for him to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse, a long way off; his mother never saw him but once or twice, and then by stealth; and his father - so eagerly did he thirst after the money which seemed to come almost within his grasp now, for his brother-in-law was very ill, and breaking more and more every day - never went near him, to avoid raising any suspicion. The brother lingered on; Mr Nickleby's wife constantly urged him to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house: seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place, and when they had been married nearly seven years, and were within a few weeks of the time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man, and left him.'

Here he paused, but Ralph did not stir, and the brothers signed to him to proceed.

'It was then that I became acquainted with these circumstances from his own lips. They were no secrets then; for the brother, and others, knew them; but they were communicated to me, not on this account, but because I was wanted. He followed the fugitives. Some said to make money of his wife's shame, but, I believe, to take some violent revenge, for that was as much his character as the other; perhaps more. He didn't find them, and she died not long after. I don't know whether he began to think he might like the child, or whether he wished to make sure that it should never fall into its mother's hands; but, before he went, he intrusted me with the charge of bringing it home. And I did so.'

He went on, from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice; pointing to Ralph as he resumed.

'He had used me ill - cruelly - I reminded him in what, not long ago when I met him in the street - and I hated him. I brought the child

home to his own house, and lodged him in the front garret. Neglect had made him very sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor, who said he must be removed for change of air, or he would die. I think that first put it in my head. I did it then. He was gone six weeks, and when he came back, I told him - with every circumstance well planned and proved; nobody could have suspected me - that the child was dead and buried. He might have been disappointed in some intention he had formed, or he might have had some natural affection, but he WAS grieved at THAT, and I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day, and making it a means of getting money from him. I had heard, like most other men, of Yorkshire schools. I took the child to one kept by a man named Squeers, and left it there. I gave him the name of Smike. Year by year, I paid twenty pounds a-year for him for six years; never breathing the secret all the time; for I had left his father's service after more hard usage, and quarrelled with him again. I was sent away from this country. I have been away nearly eight years. Directly I came home again, I travelled down into Yorkshire, and, skulking in the village of an evening-time, made inquiries about the boys at the school, and found that this one, whom I had placed there, had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought his father out in London, and hinting at what I could tell him, tried for a little money to support life; but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk, and, going on from little to little, and showing him that there were good reasons for communicating with me, learnt what was going on; and it was I who told him that the boy was no son of the man who claimed to be his father. All this time I had never seen the boy. At length, I heard from this same source that he was very ill, and where he was. I travelled down there, that I might recall myself, if possible, to his recollection and confirm my story. I came upon him unexpectedly; but before I could speak he knew me - he had good cause to remember me, poor lad! - and I would have sworn to him if I had met him in the Indies. I knew the piteous face I had seen in the little child. After a few days' indecision, I applied to the young gentleman in whose care he was, and I found that he was dead. He knows how quickly he recognised me again, how often he had described me and my leaving him at the school, and how he told him of a garret he recollected: which is the one I have spoken of, and in his father's house to this day. This is my story. I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and put to any possible proof of any part of it, and I will show that it's too true, and that I have this guilt upon my soul.'

'Unhappy man!' said the brothers. 'What reparation can you make for this?'

'None, gentlemen, none! I have none to make, and nothing to hope now. I am old in years, and older still in misery and care. This confession can bring nothing upon me but new suffering and

punishment; but I make it, and will abide by it whatever comes. I have been made the instrument of working out this dreadful retribution upon the head of a man who, in the hot pursuit of his bad ends, has persecuted and hunted down his own child to death. It must descend upon me too. I know it must fall. My reparation comes too late; and, neither in this world nor in the next, can I have hope again!

He had hardly spoken, when the lamp, which stood upon the table close to where Ralph was seated, and which was the only one in the room, was thrown to the ground, and left them in darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light; the interval was a mere nothing; but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

The good brothers and Tim Linkinwater occupied some time in discussing the probability of his return; and, when it became apparent that he would not come back, they hesitated whether or no to send after him. At length, remembering how strangely and silently he had sat in one immovable position during the interview, and thinking he might possibly be ill, they determined, although it was now very late, to send to his house on some pretence. Finding an excuse in the presence of Brooker, whom they knew not how to dispose of without consulting his wishes, they concluded to act upon this resolution before going to bed.